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Iraq: Implications of Insurrection and Prospects for Saddam's Survival

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Summary

Saddam Husayn faces his most serious political challenge in more than twenty years of power. He and his regime are confronted by economic chaos, armed insurrection, the prospect of widespread civil war, and foreign intervention. His immediate plight may ease somewhat with suppression of the insurrection in the south and a relaxation of the UN-imposed embargo, but the Kurdish rebellion and the threat of foreign intervention pose a serious threat to Saddam's continued hold on power. [redacted]

Forces loyal to him have been able to contain much of the fighting in the Shia Muslim areas of southern Iraq, but Kurdish gains in the north are probably compelling him to prematurely transfer troops north, which could reverse recent progress in restoring government control in the south. Efforts by external powers, especially Iran, to assist the rebels have aggravated the danger to Saddam but are not yet sufficient to decide the issue. [redacted]

Saddam's speech Saturday in which he promised political and economic reforms while warning of the dangers of external

[redacted]

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12

meddling suggests he is looking for ways to rally Iraqi patriotism around him. Other references in his speech suggest Saddam may have given advisors on the Revolutionary Command Council a wider role in shaping policy to save his regime. Should these efforts be unsuccessful and large-scale unrest break out in Baghdad, Saddam could be in mortal danger. He must act quickly and decisively to quell the Shia and Kurdish unrest and create a sense of stability if he is to stave off a potential coup and Iraq is to remain united. [redacted]

Political change, if and when it does come to Iraq, will probably be sudden and without warning. [redacted]

Saddam's in Control For Now

In the past week, Iraqi forces tightened their grip on the holy cities of An Najaf and Karbala in southern Iraq but resistance forces have shown surprising resiliency. Baghdad is struggling, however, to eliminate insurgents from the smaller cities along the Tigris and Euphrates River valleys. Iran's press and Shia exile sources claim that fighting has erupted in several of Baghdad's suburbs. At the same time, Kurdish insurgents in the north are making considerable gains despite the arrival of regime reinforcements from southern Iraq. The main road from Karkuk to Baghdad has been cut, and Kurdish sources claim in the press to have taken a significant amount of territory in the oil-rich province. The regime's hold on Dahuk Province, adjoining the border with Turkey, is collapsing. [redacted]

The regime appears to be getting on top of the situation in the south but it has not yet stamped out the rebellion there. The Shia insurgents are driven by religious fervor and, like the Kurds, a strong taste for revenge after years of oppression. They are also probably getting some logistic and financial support from Iran and Syria, and more may be on the way. If Saddam does not soon

quell the rebellions, the chances for a serious outbreak in Baghdad will grow and his position will be more precarious. Time is not on his side. [redacted]

Saddam has dominated Iraq longer than any other figure in its modern history. Since the revolution which brought the Ba'th Party to power in 1968 he has shaped its political and economic character, defined its foreign policies, and fashioned a national identity for one of the most ethnically and religiously diverse countries in the Middle East. He has also created one of the most authoritarian and brutal regimes in the region. [redacted]

Since the end of the war, Saddam has taken steps to ensure military support and ease domestic economic stress. He has lauded the military for its heroic role in the war and made no public search for scapegoats. He has also declared an amnesty for deserters, released some prisoners held in Iraqi jails, and eased rationing on gas. On Saturday, he offered unspecified political reforms, probably elections for a new National Assembly with broader ethnic sectarian representation. He also said he was appointing a new Minister for Reconstruction to oversee the rebuilding of a new Iraq. His "reforms" are probably intended to offer increased "popular" participation in government, but meaningful involvement by the people is unlikely. Similarly, his economic proposals are probably aimed at securing domestic and foreign sympathy by stressing civilian reconstruction needs. Few Iraqis will be convinced by these gestures, but they may sway some who are afraid or unwilling to commit themselves to rebellion. Iraqis may not miss Saddam if and when he goes, but it is probably difficult for most Iraqis--even given the death and devastation of two major wars--to imagine life without him. Most Iraqis alive today have never known another leader. [redacted]

Possible Outcomes to the Insurrection

There are several possible outcomes for the worst domestic crisis Iraq has faced since independence in 1932.

Saddam wins and revitalizes his control over Iraq. Saddam will use whatever means necessary, including draconian security measures and forced deportations, to ensure pacification. He probably has deployed military and intelligence units with orders to determine responsibility and exact maximum punishment. In his speech Saturday, Saddam described the rebellions as "proof" external forces threaten Iraq. He is likely to use this threat to rally Iraqis, particularly Sunnis, around him, warn off potential backers of the insurrections, and, in the longer-term, justify rebuilding his war machine. [redacted]

If Saddam is able to contain the insurrections he now faces, the next few years promise to be uncertain ones in Iraq. His forces will exact a heavy toll for participating or sympathizing with rebels. In previous rebellions, punishment

has included executions, mass arrests, and forced deportations and resettlement of large segments of the population to distant parts of the country. He will probably offer further cosmetic political reforms, such as presidential elections, and promise more economic relief when the coalition lifts the embargo. He will depend increasingly on an even narrower circle of family and Ba'thist loyalists, as suggested in his promotion of cousin Ali Hassan al-Majid to Interior Minister. [redacted]

Saddam loses, and a pro-Iranian Shia state emerges in Baghdad. Saddam is unlikely to survive if the rebellion takes hold in Baghdad and a large proportion of the army defects. The fighting in the southern Shia cities probably began with local anti-regime Shias who saw an opportunity in the apparent breakdown of law and order to rise against Saddam. It spread quickly, probably fanned by the arrival of Iranian-based Iraqi dissidents and Iraqi Shia certainly sought additional help from their brothers in Iran. The Shia community in Iraq is not controlled by Tehran and has indigenous historical traditions and religious institutions older than Iran's. Most Iraqi Shia probably would oppose Iraq becoming a satrapy of Iran, but many do support the political program of the Iraqi clerics in Iran, namely an Iranian-style Islamic republic, democratic elections, and majority rule. They would want to follow pro-Iranian policies, but a Shia government in Baghdad would have to allow for a broader and possibly secular base if it wanted to rule a united Iraq. [redacted]

Iraq's Shias, led by their pre-eminent cleric Grand Ayatollah Khu'i, rejected Iranian Ayatollah Khomeini's concept of velayat-e faqih (political rule by a supreme religious leader) and remained loyal to Baghdad during the eight-year war with Iran. More pragmatic Iraqi Shia leaders may view Tehran's style of government as appropriate for Iran, which is more than 95 percent Shia Muslim, but would probably not accept its complete application in Iraq, where the Shia are only 55 percent of the population and need support from other ethnic and religious factions to overthrow Saddam. [redacted]

A Shia takeover in Iraq, however, would revive Islamic revolutionary fervor in Iran and cause increased threats of Shia subversion and terrorism to the Sunni monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula. It would also increase the risk of religious fundamentalist unrest in Syria and Turkey. [redacted]

No one wins, and full-scale civil war breaks out. The central government--with or without Saddam--could be too weak to defeat its enemies and rule effectively. The Kurds have seized on the Shia revolt to stage their own rebellion, but they are too few in number (only 20 percent of the population) to take power in Baghdad. If the army and security services collapsed, then a Lebanon-style power vacuum would exist, and a general civil war involving Shias, Sunnis, and Kurds might develop. The Lebanonization of Iraq could

follow. As in Lebanon, the biggest danger would be foreign intervention. Iran, Syria, and Turkey would see their national interests threatened and could be tempted to intervene. Even if Saddam defeats the Shia, he may face a prolonged Kurdish uprising in the mountainous north which would be a source of instability for the region. [redacted]

Removing Saddam: Scenarios for a Coup

The prospect of a Shia victory, or just prolonged internal strife, could also encourage disparate Sunni elements in Iraq, including anti-Ba'thist nationalists, pro-Syrian Ba'thists, and military elites to rally around Saddam as the only recourse to an Iranian-influenced Shia regime. It also could force political change on Saddam, including his overthrow. [redacted]

Saddam Survives but is Forced to Share Power in a Palace Coup. A few family members, senior Party officials, or senior military officers could force Saddam to share power. They would see a need to keep Saddam probably because he retained the loyalty of the security and intelligence forces and the Party. They might also fear that to remove him precipitously would trigger wider-scale revolt. Iraq has no "retirement plan" for its rulers and Saddam certainly assumes that, if he cannot flee--and we believe it uncharacteristic for him to run from a fight--then he must compromise or be killed. Saddam could offer to share power with senior military leaders who may command popular respect and who he believes are closely identified with him and will, therefore, protect him. Most are likely to accept such an offer in order to protect themselves from more sweeping and dangerous change. There would be no fundamental change in Iraqi policies or intentions. [redacted]

Cooperative military leaders would probably hope to control Saddam and would probably remain loyal to him as long as an external military threat exists. Saddam would probably view an arrangement with the military as a marriage of convenience to be dissolved when order had been restored and his position was secure again. Military and Party officers in this arrangement would probably have a similar view of the relationship and hope to remove Saddam at a later date. [redacted]

Saddam is Removed By Insiders. Saddam could be removed by a member of his inner circle or senior military figures who believe that his continued rule threatens their lives, families, and fortunes. If he were killed and his security apparatus remained cohesive, power would probably be seized by a senior military leader or by a committee of surviving influential Tikritis, Ba'th Party officials, and senior military officers assisted by the intelligence and security services. These political elites would probably jockey for position among themselves, but a power struggle in this context would not necessarily involve foreign backers. [redacted]

A successor government probably would make significant concessions to reduce regional tensions in order to consolidate its own position, but not because it disagreed with Saddam's claim that Kuwait belonged to Iraq, his vision of Iraq's regional hegemony, his tactics of brutality, or his style of strong-man rule. The new leaders would probably look to the United States for assurances of tacit acceptance, for example, that no war crimes trials would be held, no reparations levied, no limits placed on Iraq's military, and that all sanctions be lifted. No successor regime, however pro-Western its orientation or professed sympathies, is likely to agree voluntarily to further reduce Iraq's military strength. A military regime is especially unlikely to make concessions. And no successor regime, however desirous it might be for harmonious relations with the West or with neighboring regimes, will want to be perceived as acting on behalf of an outside power. [redacted]

In these scenarios, Syria, Iran, and Turkey would probably reaffirm their support for Iraq's territorial integrity, and probably would not make a grab for Iraqi territory. But they would continue to encourage the Iraqi dissidents they host and eye the borders with Iraq more closely. [redacted]

Revolution by Outsiders: Saddam and the Regime are Destroyed. Individuals involved in the insurrection or a group of military and political officials who hold mid-level positions and blame Saddam and his generals for Iraq's destruction could trigger the overthrow the entire regime. Members of Saddam's family, the Party, government leaders, and even senior military leaders closely aligned with Saddam would be swept away. Military officers would still probably provide the bare bones of leadership, but it could very well be difficult to find someone to oversee a provisional government. A weak national front government would probably be formed. [redacted]

Rivals inside Iraq and outside the country would compete for power. The fragile 17-party coalition formed in Damascus last December would probably collapse, and competing factions would try to consolidate their hold on sections of the country and Baghdad. The Kurds would probably set up an autonomous government in the northern provinces and might even declare independence. Shia clerics in southern Iraq would demand an influential voice for Iraq's majority Shia population in the new government. [redacted]

Under this scenario, Iraq's Arab neighbors would signal support for continuation of Sunni Arab government. Turkey would more openly covet land ceded decades ago to Iraq but would probably not cross the border unless Kurdish unrest threatened Turkish internal security. Iran would probably seize key border posts and oil fields in border areas. [redacted]

Power Centers

The military and the Ba'th Party will play a role in determining Iraq's political future with or without Saddam. Other factors such as ambitions among influential extended families, age-old rivalries between Arab and Kurd, Sunni

and Shia also clearly will persist, but ethnic tensions may be muted initially if the anti-Saddam rebellion succeeds. [redacted]

Military. Iraq's military traditionally has played a key role in determining the country's political leadership. From 1932 when Iraq became independent to 1968 when the Ba'th Party seized power through a military coup, Iraqi military officers conducted six successful coups and countless failed attempts. No Iraqi regime has been able to ignore the military's political influence, particularly its penchant for corrective coups, and it will likely play a decisive role in determining any successor to Saddam. [redacted]

The military's independence has been restricted by the Ba'th regime. Saddam has used natural attrition--including death in the Iran-Iraq war--purges, arrests, and executions to eliminate an older, less politically reliable generation of military officers and create in their place a new cadre of military loyalists. He has also appointed family and clan members from Tikrit and other loyalists to key positions and frequently transferred or forced into retirement popular senior officers to prevent them from building independent power bases. Saddam also secured military loyalty by providing the lion's share of the budget for huge inventories of some of the best military equipment available and showering lavish rewards among the officer corps. Finally, Saddam built up the Republican Guards as a loyalist Sunni praetorian guard to ensure the loyalty of the military to himself and the Sunni-Tikriti establishment. [redacted]

The wars with Iran and over Kuwait have almost certainly cost Saddam military support. We believe many officers and enlisted men must harbor considerable resentment against him for giving away the gains acquired in the costly war with Iran and for nearly destroying Iraq's military capability in the Kuwait war. [redacted]

The Party. Less is known about the status of the Ba'th Party, its willingness to challenge Saddam for power, or its ability to survive in a regime without him. Over the years, Saddam managed to eliminate Party theoreticians and popular figures who he believed were capable of building a power base within the Party. The Party ruled Iraq through its control of the Revolutionary Command Council and government posts. Saddam gradually stripped the RCC and hence the Party of its ability to elect leaders, including the President, or debate policy. In many cases he made competence or personal loyalty the primary criteria for advancement over Party membership. [redacted]

The more extensive the coup in Baghdad, the less likely the Ba'th Party is to play a role in the new government. Ba'thist leaders who survived the coup would probably be irrelevant in determining policy. The Party's older generation has probably been effectively purged of any capable actors or thinkers, and its younger generation probably lacks the initiative necessary to shape an effective political force. Loyalty to family and sectarian ties would probably outweigh loyalty to an outmoded political machine. [redacted]

There are no clear front runners for succession in the military or the Party. [redacted]

The Army and the Party might decide to work together to ease the transition to a post-Saddam government and win acceptance by Iraqis and foreign governments. [redacted] Eventually, traditional conspiratorial Iraqi political styles--in particular the bloody coup--would assert themselves, and one strong man would seek to control Baghdad. According to the Iraqi Constitution, the Revolutionary Command Council has the authority to elect a new president should the post become vacant, but no "candidate" is likely to use this mechanism for transferring power unless he is sure of his "election." [redacted]

Succession Without Destruction: The Legal Mechanisms

Iraq has not had a succession crisis since the 1968 revolution which brought the Ba'th Party, General Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr, and his "deputy" Saddam Husayn to power. Bakr was eased out of office in 1979, but there was no serious opposition to Saddam. The interim constitution of 1968 gave the RCC the power to elect the president and select a new one if he resigned. Later revisions of the Constitution shifted power away from the RCC to the Presidency but shied away from the succession issue. In 1980 Saddam proposed the Constitution be amended to allow the election of the President by a popular referendum. As with most political "reforms" in Iraq, these were paper exercises intended to allay ethnic unrest and convince the West of Baghdad's liberal tendencies. Saddam never had any intention of widening the electoral franchise or moving Iraq to a more democratic political society. His vice president, Taha Muhyi al-Din Ma'ruf, a Kurd, [redacted] has no power base. He certainly would not succeed Saddam. [redacted]

Prospects

We believe Saddam will do whatever is necessary to keep himself and his regime in power and preserve his military capability. His position is probably secure as long as his intelligence and security services remain intact, the military backs him, he is seen to be wielding authority, and his potential opponents believe he may make a deal which will ensure his survival. References by Saddam in his recent speech to his "leadership comrades" suggests he may already be allowing Revolutionary Command Council members [redacted] and perhaps some senior military figures to play a more active role in policy formation. [redacted]

Even these circumstances may not be enough to save him. Saddam may be forced to make further concessions to senior civilian officials and the military to ensure their cooperation in the brutal suppression of the insurrection and support for his continued rule. If so, his powers will be limited and Iraq could witness a prolonged period of instability after the end of the insurrection as military and political leaders around Saddam jockey for power. [redacted]

The economy will be a key factor. If UN sanctions continue and Saddam is unable to sell oil, his position internally will be at increasingly greater risk. Even if the embargo is lifted, the enormous reconstruction challenge facing Iraq will require Saddam to deal more energetically and efficiently with economic problems than he has ever done in the past. [redacted]

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